



---

'Knowing Where You've Come from': Ruptures and Continuities of Time and Kinship in Narratives of Adoption Reunions

Author(s): Janet Carsten

Source: *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, Dec., 2000, Vol. 6, No. 4 (Dec., 2000), pp. 687-703

Published by: Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2661037>

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*

# 'KNOWING WHERE YOU'VE COME FROM': RUPTURES AND CONTINUITIES OF TIME AND KINSHIP IN NARRATIVES OF ADOPTION REUNIONS

JANET CARSTEN  
*University of Edinburgh*

This article, based on research in Scotland, discusses reunions between adults who have been adopted in infancy, and their birth kin. Although the distinction between 'biological' and 'social' kinship, which is central to the anthropological analysis of kinship, is clearly relevant to experiences of reunions, as it is to adoption more generally, this analytic focus is disrupted by issues of temporality, biographical completion, and memory, which both motivate and are raised by reunions. Narratives about adoption reunions can be used to illuminate the connections between these different themes. I explore the implications of these both for experiences of kinship in the West more generally and for the anthropological analysis of kinship.

This article considers issues of temporality and kinship which are brought to the fore in reunions between adults adopted in infancy and their birth kin. The ethnographic material is drawn from Britain, but in places I extend my focus to analytic discussions of kinship in the West. The discussion is a preliminary attempt to consider a set of issues raised in the anthropology of time in the light of ideas about biographical completion, which emerge from interviews with those who have experienced adoption reunions.

These reunions can be understood as reflections on personal biography and the completeness or incompleteness of personal histories. However, reunions also apparently speak to another discussion at the heart of the anthropological analysis of kinship. This concerns the separation of 'biological' and 'social' aspects of kinship (cf. Modell 1994).<sup>1</sup> But in the cases I consider, this analytical focus has been disrupted by the issues of biography, agency, and memory which are raised by the material I present. Rather than foreground one set of issues at the expense of another, I attempt here to keep several in view in order to illuminate their interconnections.

In my previous work (Carsten 1997), I have described the processes by which Malay people on the island of Langkawi make kinship in their everyday lives, not just through ties engendered by sexual procreation, but also by living together in houses and sharing meals. Over time, the accumulation of shared meals and cohabitation can establish 'natural' links between those who may have been originally unrelated but are brought together by in-migration,

fostering, or marriage. In contrast to this gradual process of creating physical connections with cohabitants of one house, the Western literature on adoption suggests that genetic connections with birth kin continue to exert a strong presence in the lives of adoptees even when they have been with an adoptive family since infancy.

It was with this contrast in mind that I set out to do research on reunions between adult adoptees and their birth kin in Britain. I was interested both in what motivated adoptees to conduct searches and in what transpired after initial meetings had taken place. My first contacts with those who had experienced reunions with birth kin in the relatively recent past were made with the help of a Scottish NGO, which in the past had functioned as an adoption agency and more recently exercised a number of 'social work' functions including helping people to trace birth kin from whom they had been separated through adoption. Of the thirty people who had experience of reunions who were contacted on my behalf, thirteen agreed to be interviewed. The majority of these were women, and they ranged from their mid-twenties to their sixties. All of the adoptees I spoke to had initially focused on searching for and establishing contact with their birth mother, although in many cases they later tried to get information about and meet with their birth father and birth siblings.

I conducted all interviews in respondents' own homes, which helped to give me some valuable additional insight into the lives and families of those whose stories I was eliciting. From quite early on in my research, I was visibly struck by the many family photographs on display in almost all the living rooms which I saw. For me, the photographs underlined the fact that most of those I talked to had established their own conjugal families and were clearly immersed in a quite dense network of kin relations.

Interviewees were strikingly articulate, and they had much to say about their experiences. In many cases this could be understood as a mark of the many years spent reflecting on their own experience of adoption, as well as the more recent effect of reunions. Often, it seemed to me that my role as interviewer was reduced to an absolutely minimal one: interjecting a monosyllabic question or a word of encouragement was sufficient to keep the interview going for a considerable time. Interviews were relatively unstructured; they sometimes lasted several hours and were intense emotional events which yielded very rich and complex material.

As an ethnographer, one could hardly ignore the disparity between the content of these conversations and the transience of the connection between interviewee and interviewer. This of course raises questions about the status of the narratives to which I listened. Since I did not insert myself into the daily lives of my informants, I was unable to observe the ways in which those I interviewed constructed different versions of themselves in other contexts, or how such versions might fit together. I do not have space to enlarge on these issues here: readers should be aware that not only were interviewees self-selected but, as interviewer, I constituted myself as a witness to their narratives.<sup>2</sup> Just what is entailed in the process of listening in which I engaged is a question to which I return towards the end of this paper. A further point I would stress here is that, although I have collected some anecdotal material on adopted people who have *not* searched for or met their birth kin, I have

not as yet carried out any interviews with adoptees who have not experienced reunions.<sup>3</sup>

Although the interviews were easy to conduct in that I had no trouble eliciting information, the processing of this material has been considerably more difficult. The emotional tenor and the richness of the interviews have meant that digesting their content is proving a slow process. These are, in more than one sense, destabilizing stories, and I am only beginning to discover what they are about.

When I began conducting interviews with those who had experienced adoption reunions, it was with a specific idea in mind. My hunch was that accounts of these reunions might offer an insight into some of the ways in which 'biological' and 'social' kinship are separated in contemporary Britain. Such reunions, I surmised, would necessarily be predicated upon quite sharp juxtapositions and articulations between what is expected from, or attributed to, adoptive as opposed to birth kin. My own hesitancy about the research I was undertaking was well articulated for me by a colleague who prefaced her friendly enquiries about this work with the remark, 'Oh, are they all terribly geneticist?' Indeed, the assumption that the motivations of adopted people seeking such meetings would reveal thoroughly geneticist views about kinship and personhood was an obvious one to make. The reality, which I am just beginning to tease apart, is of course somewhat different.

What emerges from the stories is that reunions only make sense in terms of the whole lives of those whom I interviewed. In making contact with their birth kin, adoptees seek to recover a sense of agency over their own pasts, and this often involves a kind of retrospective bereavement process, as they encounter the difficulties these relations set in train. But in strongly asserting the positive value of 'knowing where you've come from', adoptees vividly demonstrate the importance of establishing continuities in their own lives between past, present, and future. The crucial nature of this sense of historical continuity to interviewees' sense of self and kinship demonstrates the kinds of ruptures that are set in train by the adoption practices discussed here. But I argue that these stories have a much wider significance, in illuminating the centrality of that sense of a 'past and a future in the present', to anyone conscious of the gaps in their personal biography – in other words, to experiences of kinship and selfhood more generally.

### *Adoption reunions*

In the interviews which I conducted, a number of apparently typical scenarios emerged. The most frequent response to being asked what had prompted interviewees to search for their birth kin was simply, 'to know where I came from', 'to be complete', or 'to find out who I am' (cf. Modell 1994: 135–6, 143–59; Triseliotis 1973: 71, 118, 139–40). Indeed, the answers I received were so formulaic that they suggested the question itself was almost redundant: wasn't it entirely obvious why one would want to undergo this process? This was reiterated in the highly positive terms in which all those I interviewed spoke about the effects searching for birth kin had had on their lives, even when the actual relations they had managed to establish could only be seen

as a qualified success or where they were obviously not functional. It was made clear to me that the results of these reunions could not be assessed merely in terms of the relationships they had set in train. As the first person I talked to put it towards the end of her interview, 'You've got to know where you came from. You've got to find the end.'

The experience of searching for, and then meeting with, birth kin was frequently accompanied by considerable pain and upheaval. Very often, I sensed that this pain had begun long before the actual search was initiated. Relations with adoptive kin were described to me in very variable ways by different informants. In some cases, adoptive parents were described in highly positive terms as being extremely loving and supportive, so much so that they were sometimes felt to have been almost too protective or indulgent. In others, these relations were clearly tense and problematic or were experienced as just rather distant and quite unaffectionate. Whatever the nature of these ties, the longing to connect to one's birth relatives seemed almost axiomatic. In just one or two cases interviewees themselves expressed some surprise that they had undergone this process – 'it was nothing that really concerned me' – but then they simply said they attributed this taken-for-grantedness elsewhere – to friends or others who expressed interest and concern.

The outcome of these searches was, at least for those involved, unknowable. All of those whom I interviewed vividly described their anxiety and nervousness as they neared the end of their search and attempted to set up an initial meeting, usually with a birth mother. In one especially poignant case a young woman with her own family recalled how she had gone to the lengths of buying a new outfit, and how carefully she had calculated her desired appearance:

I'd just been out and I'd bought myself a new jumper. I thought I'll wear my trouser suit and this new jumper to meet her. I had it all planned out – I didn't want to look too dressy; I didn't want to look too scruffy. I just wanted to look in between, because I had this idea that maybe she was quite poor.

But as her search came to its conclusion, this woman discovered that her mother who, it transpired, had herself made repeated but unsuccessful attempts to contact her daughter, had died not long before her daughter discovered her identity. Death was, in fact, a surprisingly recurrent theme in the narratives I collected. Very frequently, it turned out that a birth mother or a birth father was no longer living, and this was often the most traumatic of many difficult discoveries.

The outcome of these searches was entirely unpredictable. Interviewees inevitably reiterated this uncertainty over what might be discovered about their backgrounds when I asked them what advice they would pass on to others who were considering undertaking a search for birth kin: 'I would say go for it – so long as they know what they want out of it, and be ready for the down sides of it. Always prepare yourself for the down sides of it.' In just a few cases my informants described being able to establish some kind of harmonious relations with their birth kin. And it was striking that such positive outcomes tended to occur in cases where relations between the adopted person and their adoptive parents were also clearly warm and harmonious.

Even here, meetings between birth kin tended to be conducted on a somewhat infrequent and quite formal basis. The exchange of Christmas and birthday cards was often pointed out as indicating the extent to which relations had been established. While such formal exchanges were obviously suggestive of the current limits of relations, they could nevertheless be viewed as potential openings to future possibilities.

In the majority of cases, I would say that these relations had a doomed quality about them. They were as impossible to establish now as they had been in the past: doubly foreclosed, as it were, by death, by particular histories, by the nature of the personalities involved, by the excess of demands on one side or on both. One woman described to me how, not long after an initial meeting, her birth mother had started to make demands and give advice in a way that she felt was quite unwarranted. As she put it, her birth mother simply didn't have that right, it had been forfeited when she had been given up for adoption thirty years before.<sup>4</sup> The idea that the normal exchanges of kinship are not an automatic right but a privilege earned through the demonstrated hard effort that goes into nurturing and caring for a child was brought up by several interviewees. As one adoptee told me, 'I wasn't after another mother; I have one'. Such statements were in part a kind of declaration of loyalty to adoptive parents, but they also expressed some of the tensions involved in establishing a new set of relations with birth kin.<sup>5</sup>

The acknowledged importance of time and effort to the production of kinship, and a strong disavowal of the notion that, in the absence of such sustained nurturing, there is an automatic bond of kinship given by the fact of birth, might be thought surprising in people who had committed considerable time and effort to discovering who their birth relatives were. While the act of seeking out birth relatives appears in a very obvious sense to underline the primacy of birth ties in the culture of British kinship, in other ways these adopted people simultaneously disturb that primacy. In questioning the rights of birth parents, as well as in the frequent acknowledgements of the role their own adoptive parents have played, interviewees strongly assert the values of care and effort that go into the creation of kin ties.

The destabilization of or 'interference' in the symbolic value of birth ties is accompanied by shifts in the value given to time itself in the production of kinship. A striking feature of many of the interviews I conducted was the frequent recourse made to visual artefacts of various kinds, to the letters, photographs, poems, official documents, articles of babies' clothing, which were either produced or referred to in the course of conversation. In the context of adoption, birth does not imply certainty or endurance or solidarity. It is thus emptied of most of the symbolic meaning it has in the dominant discourse of kinship. Time itself then comes to have a key role in producing new meanings for kinship. The visual artefacts which were regularly produced out of a special box, suitcase, or file for my inspection were a literal production of history. Like objects in a museum, and similarly marked off from everyday objects, they gave historical depth to current versions of the identities of those I interviewed.<sup>6</sup> The significance of these objects and the kind of retrospective history being constructed were considerably heightened by the frequency with which not only adoption but the death of a birth parent had disrupted the flow of time in these relationships. Whether such



deaths preceded or followed the discovery of a birth parent's identity, they encapsulated the very considerable dislocations of 'kinship time' experienced by those seeking reunions.

If the motivations of those seeking reunions were in some way to discover 'where they had come from', then the importance of constructing a documented history with its accompanying mnemonic objects is not hard to grasp. But the assumption that these searches were predicated on a thoroughly geneticist view of human nature or personhood was not straightforwardly borne out, even when those involved seemed to be enacting thoroughly geneticist moves. I interviewed a woman in her sixties who had been adopted as a baby. Some years before, as the mother of three grown children, she had begun a search for her birth kin. This woman described to me the process of searching for, and eventually making contact with, her birth kin. One of the many poignant aspects of this story was that although her birth father's name was on her birth certificate (an unusual circumstance in cases of illegitimate birth of that era), when she eventually found him, he repeatedly denied to her that he was her father. Eventually, in an effort to 'stop the lies' (as she put it), she underwent DNA screening together with a half-sister on her father's side. The results were apparently conclusive: her birth father's identity was confirmed. But in another poignant twist, by the time the results came through, her father had died. I was struck by the apparent futility of the procedure. As she told me, she had wanted the results to 'waft them under his nose', but by the time she had them 'he didn't have a nose to waft them under'. But long before undergoing testing, she had known that he was, as she put it, 'a chancer', 'someone who would sell something worth 50p for £50'. It seemed doubtful that by this stage she would have wanted to assert anything beyond the physical tie to her father.

Interviewees often referred to aspects of their own physical appearance and talked about this in relation to that of their adoptive and their birth parents. Such attributes were often highlighted when interviewees described their uncertainty about their identity, and the motivations behind their search (cf. Modell 1994: 133). One woman, very typically, described how, as a child, she had always been very much aware of her curly hair because her adopted parents and their families had straight hair. When she eventually met her birth mother, she realized the provenance of her curls. What is foregrounded in biological connection is thus continuities in physical appearance. But in this case, as in many others, the relationship itself had not reached a harmonious footing. While physical connections were often easy to make, emotional ties did not necessarily follow. In another interview, a middle-aged woman used the assumption of a continuity in physical characteristics to underline the rupture she had experienced with her birth mother. She described how, at the moment of meeting her birth mother, the latter had exclaimed over the absence of all her dark curls which she had had as a baby. Here, the implied criticism was that, at this momentous time, her birth mother had found nothing but a physical triviality to comment on.

One young man vividly described the acute misery he had felt growing up as the only black child in his neighbourhood and school. But when, in his thirties, he managed to trace his birth mother (who was white) and finally met her, although 'it was a good feeling of meeting her', he described how

the woman he faced was a 'total stranger' – there was simply no connection. 'There's definitely no "ting", connection like that, because this is somebody you don't know. You don't know this person, it's a total stranger. It might not have been my mother, she could have sent somebody else.'

This lack of any connection was reiterated in many interviewees' accounts of their first meeting with birth kin and contrasts sharply with media accounts of reunions, which tend to be cast in highly romantic and sentimental (not to say cataclysmic) tones.<sup>7</sup> Where media accounts suggest that ties can simply be taken up where they had been left, those I interviewed gave a quite different impression. Ties to birth kin required time as a necessary but not in itself sufficient input to establish themselves. A few of those I interviewed did feel some initial sense of connectedness, but they were a minority. Nor did reunions with different birth relatives necessarily take the same course. The young man who denied any sense of connectedness with his birth mother not only established a good relationship with his maternal half-sister<sup>8</sup> but also came to know quite a lot about his birth father, who had died shortly before he managed to discover his identity. In the absence of any possibility of meeting, it was clear that the facts he had established about his father's identity had not only assured him of his own connection to this man, but had been instrumental in resolving his own uncertainties over 'where he had come from'.

When I asked those I interviewed how they viewed the relative importance of 'nature' and 'nurture' in their own personal make-up, the responses were very variable. Most simply said, quite unremarkably, that they thought their personalities were a result of a mixture of both their genetic inheritance and the environment in which they had grown up, although some responses attributed the greater role to biology or to environment. One woman told me that her adoptive parents had never seemed anything like her, 'it's like living in a house of people who are aliens'. Some said that even though meeting a birth parent had made sense of a particular character trait or a talent that they possessed, they felt their overall personalities, and the course their life had taken, had been shaped more by the way they had been brought up. My hunch is that such statements probably would not differ sharply, in either their content or their variation, from those of the general population.

What, then, to make of the separation of 'biological' and 'social' aspects in these accounts of kinship? My overwhelming impression is that this distinction is rather more muddled than any simple model would lead us to expect. Here birth does not imply 'diffuse, enduring solidarity', in Schneider's (1980) terms, emptied as it is of the connection to certainty, longevity, or obligations and rights. Meanwhile, from the point of view of the child adoptive kinship is stripped of the elements of choice or preference which anthropologists generally attribute to friendship or 'fictive kinship'.

In trying to establish new relations with birth kin, adopted people must somehow reorder the symbols of kinship. The ways in which they do so do not suggest the heavy reliance on a genetic content of kinship which we might expect. A concern about physical attributes plays a part in motivating searches, but apparently loses significance once reunions have occurred. The symbolic importance of birth ties, which is seemingly reiterated by the process of searching for birth kin, is in many cases disrupted or denied in the



troubled outcomes of these searches. Nor can we perceive a very sharp or consistent distinction made between what 'travels in the blood' and what is absorbed from the environment. Instead, there appears to be a considerable degree of picking and choosing, what Edwards and Strathern (2000) term 'interdigitation', between the apparent excess of elements of kinship which are available. Schneider's two opposed orders of nature and law (1980) become almost inextricably intertwined, when letters or legal documents can stand in for blood or nurturing, or an informant asserts a birth mother felt like 'a total stranger'. Schneider's (1984) suggestion that folk models of Western kinship were the source of the overwhelming symbolic power attributed by anthropologists to sexual procreation is likewise put into question when time, care, and sustained effort take their place besides birth in the culture of kinship.

But if the opposition between 'biological' and 'social' is an inadequate lens through which to view this material, what else does it seem to be about? The stories narrated to me suggest an immense concern with recovering a lost biography, with becoming a complete person, and with a desire to fill in the gaps. They are also about the painful impossibility of closing the circle. And here I think these stories may have something to tell us about kinship in Britain more generally. We can detect an implicit comparison by those interviewed between themselves and those brought up by birth parents. The irony, of course, is that those who grow up with their birth families are also likely to be conscious of the gaps in their personal biographies. To put it more strongly, in many respects the interviews can be read as accounts of a kind of retrospective bereavement process,<sup>9</sup> but of course bereavement is a prominent theme in personal biographies and accounts of kinship more generally. My sense, then, is that these stories have as much to tell us generally about personhood, time, biography, and perhaps even the process of bereavement, as they do about the articulation of biological and social aspects of kinship in a rather narrow set of circumstances.

### *Unravelling some fictions*

Schneider's (1980) distinction between the orders of nature and of law, or between substance and code, is at the heart of his analysis of American kinship. It also carries with it a considerable baggage of assumptions about 'the West' and 'the rest'. The clear opposition between these two domains of kinship is crucial to Schneider's undertaking; it can be linked to a wider set of oppositions which are quite familiar in the anthropological study of kinship and beyond. The distinction between substance and code draws on those between nature and culture, and between the biological and the social.

The deployment of these terms in anthropological analysis has carried strong implications about the different nature of kinship in the West and the rest. If Western kinship was marked by a clear separation between nature and law, the kinship of non-Westerners was often, by contrast, described as a domain for the mixing of nature and culture or the transformation of one into the other (see Carsten 1995; 1997; 2000; Latour 1993; Strathern 1992; Weismantel 1995).

Schneider regarded the combinatory potential of substance and code as at the heart of what constituted a blood relative in American ideas (1980: 28). But it is worth pausing to consider the nature of this combination, and the work that both the separation and the combination of these elements does, both for indigenous ideas about kinship and for their analysis by anthropologists. Schneider suggested that the fundamental and implicit assumption on which the entire analysis of kinship (from Maine and Morgan to Fortes and Lévi-Strauss) rested was that 'blood is thicker than water'. Kinship was what he called 'a privileged system' because it derived from the bonds of sexual procreation, and this was seen as a natural and biological process, whatever cultural value this process might be accorded (1984: 155-77). It followed that adoption had a particular importance in the classic accounts precisely because it afforded an opportunity to observe the apparently universal distinction between kin relations which are 'real', biologically based, and those which are 'fictive', not derived from ties of sexual procreation (Schneider 1984: 171-3; see also Modell 1994). For Schneider, it was clear that the analytical assumptions to which I have referred were both hidden *and* derived from European culture (1984: 175). For this reason, it seems important to look closely at examples from Europe and North America where we might expect the separation between real and fictive ties to be quite clear and unambiguous.

Weston's depiction of formal kinship ideology among gays and lesbians in San Francisco in the 1980s makes clear that what makes kinship real or authentic in this context is not biogenetic connection but duration in time. In the construction of an alternative ideology of the family, there is an explicit refusal to accept biological connectedness as the source of kinship. Instead, the construction of an apparent oxymoron, 'chosen families', rests on permanence as the source, and simultaneously the proof, of the authenticity of these ties. Permanence is not simply ascribed as a natural quality of blood ties, as in the dominant ideology of kinship, but must be actively produced in time (Weston 1995: 90-1, 99-102). She points out that while the equation between natural ties and permanence is commonly made in discourses of kinship, the attribution of permanence to the biological processes of sexual procreation, birth, life, and death is in any case quite arbitrary. 'From mortality and procreation to the perpetual renewal of tissue at the cellular level, biological processes might just as easily constitute a signifier of change and flux rather than continuity and control' (Weston 1995: 103). If, as Weston argues, this is neither a straightforward rejection nor a simple reproduction of dominant modes of kinship, then it suggests that the symbolic work of kinship leaves much more open than Schneider's analysis implies.

I find Weston's discussion helpful not so much for suggesting that non-biological kinship can be 'really real', a point which also emerges from Modell's (1994) study, but for explicitly questioning the taken-for-granted link between permanence and biology. For Schneider, it was clear that biology in the end boiled down to sexual procreation, itself a symbol of love (see Schneider 1980; see also Kuper 1999: 134-8), and this was the source of the enduring nature of kin ties. Weston's example forcibly reminds us that this link between biology and permanence may be ruptured and refigured, and not just by adoption. In narratives about reunions we have seen how biological connection can come to be interpreted in terms of physical similarity or the passing-on of

particular character traits or talents; in other words, it becomes bound up with a search for physical continuities and a desire for completeness.

### *Time and personal biography*

In the case of American gay kinship, Weston shows that time authenticates the chosen ties that really matter to those involved. In the cases I describe here, time comes to authenticate not just adoptive but also birth kinship. But those whose stories I listened to were also confronting the ruptures in their own kinship time, the radical breaks in the steady accumulation of everyday practical experiences of kinship that had in turn disrupted the flow of ritually marked kinship time.<sup>10</sup> My sense of what they were missing was precisely that quality of the 'past-present-future all rolled into one', to paraphrase Gell (1998: 17), which is implicitly interwoven into everyday experiences of kinship and which provides the background to the events marked in kinship rituals like birthdays, weddings, and funerals. The difficulty of establishing this quality is indicated by the fact that although many interviewees reported to me that they now sent or received birthday and Christmas cards, and some could even contemplate inviting birth parents to their wedding, it was clear that, whatever their future potential, the extent to which relations had been established was in most cases quite limited. These ritual events, which ideally should serve as high points in a more everyday cycle of kinship exchanges, had become detached from their points of reference. The steady accumulation of everyday and unmarked exchanges of kinship was missing in relations with birth kin. And this, in turn, emptied such ritual high points of much of their desired meaning.

In adoptees' attempts to produce new histories for themselves through the production of mnemonic objects – birth certificates, photographs, poems, items of clothing – one can see a construction of kinship in the past. But by their nature, biographies produced in this way reveal the gaps as much as they close them. Such objects are often vivid and painful reminders of the missing threads of continuity between them, a point underlined by their physical separation from other household mementoes. They serve, in other words, to document the breaks in kinship as much as the re-established connections.

But these stories are not just about the presence of the past in the present, although they certainly are that. They are also about the *transmission* of kinship and its memories. Here it is important to recall the immersion of most of those I spoke to in their own conjugal families, visually marked by the framed photographs of children and grandchildren displayed in their living rooms. If those I interviewed seemed all too conscious that adoptive kinship is founded on rupture and separation, they were evidently concerned to produce their own connections in the present and future. Where the connection to past generations has been disrupted, the significance of children as embodiments of that sense of 'the future in the present' is likely to be all the greater.

One theme referred to by many interviewees in explaining their quest for birth kin was the desire to have access to medical histories. This desire was, like others, apparently self-evident, requiring little explanation, although

several people spoke of their desire to know their own medical histories for what they might hold for themselves and their children. I was vividly struck by the woman who recounted to me how, at the birth of her first child, she had been wheeled into the labour ward 'with a folder on the bed, a manila folder with "adopted" written on top in big red letters'. Here, the lack of a medical history not only marked her out from other mothers, but was a lack transmitted to the child she was about to have. Knowledge of the medical history of forebears is desired not just as a means to acquire a complete personal biography, but as something that might be transmitted down the generations. It encapsulates a history of kinship, but its significance is for the future.

The difficulty is, of course, that this sense of the future is not only connected to the present, and to the future-in-the-present, but it can also not be detached from the past. As Munn (1992: 115) has observed of this series of temporal connections, 'any part of the relation also tacitly implicates the other parts'. I have recounted how interviewees had difficulty in constructing a continuous history, and in integrating new relations with birth kin into the everyday stuff of kinship in the present. Several interviewees also made it clear that they had even more difficulty in transmitting this into the future by introducing their own children to the idea, much less the reality, of having more than two sets of grandparents.<sup>11</sup>

### *Inventing continuity, constructing memory*

I have suggested that the disruptions to the sense of accumulated everyday events during childhood and growing-up, and the resultant distortions of the meaning of the ritual moments of kinship, pose limitations on adoptees' capacity to establish relations with birth kin. The chain of connections between past, present, and future kinship has been broken or inadequately patched over. But we can also look at this steady accumulation of everyday events as the stuff of which, retrospectively, shared memory may be created. If kinship is constituted out of everyday small acts and events in time, this is also a prospective process of co-production of memory.<sup>12</sup>

In their highly thought-provoking edited volume on trauma and memory, Antze and Lambek (1996: xxii) view memory as crucial to the construction of identity. They suggest that when identity is not in question, then neither is memory. Several expositions in that volume discuss the ways in which narratives about the past may be used to bridge dislocations and build a continuous identity, and this suggests analogies with adoptees' efforts to construct a sense of continuity between their pasts, presents, and futures.<sup>13</sup>

Antze and Lambek argue that who you are is linked to what you remember, to the stories you tell about your past. They discuss not only memory as socially constituted in narratives, but also the constitution of self through remembering. I have been struck by the echo of the terms in which adoptees speak about reunions in Antze's (1996) discussion of treatments of child abuse and Multiple Personality Disorder. Proponents of the idea that therapeutic benefits may be derived from retrieving supposedly repressed memories of childhood trauma, 'speak of "the tremendous reward of knowing your own

history,” of knowing “who you are and where you came from” (Frederickson 1992: 127 cited in Antze 1996: 9). In the narratives I have presented here, and in their accompanying mnemonic objects, we can see just such attempts to create a sense of a continuous self, but also to take control of events in the past that were controlled by others. The emphasis Antze and Lambek place on the forging of identity through the creation of shared memory, and the importance of narratives to this process, also highlights the importance of those who listen. Here I return to one of the points with which I began, the role of the ethnographer who listens to these narratives. It seems clear that both telling these stories and having them listened to is constitutive of the process of rearranging the past to assert one’s own creative control over events shaped by others.

This assertion of agency over one’s own past may perhaps explain the disjuncture between the often problematic relations which adoptees establish with birth kin and the positive terms in which they speak about the results of conducting searches (cf. Triseliotis 1973: 139). Reunions enable adoptees to activate a sense that they are choosing their kin for themselves. Here, perhaps, we can discern a divergence between the experience of adoptees and the cases of child abuse or Holocaust survivors discussed by Antze (1996), Kirmayer (1996), and Kugelmass (1996). In asking the crucial question, what do the narratives he considers foreclose, Antze draws attention to a growing culture of victimhood in contemporary North America. The experiences of reunions narrated to me, however, reveal a profound desire to assert control over one’s past. I sense that those I interviewed would wish to avoid perceiving themselves, or being perceived by others, as victims.<sup>14</sup>

It is not possible to pursue here all the paths suggested by the subtle discussions in Antze and Lambek’s collection. Nevertheless, the question of what is foreclosed in these experiences is pertinent. Perhaps part of the answer is to be found in the pervasive sense of sadness in many of the encounters with birth kin which I have related. Some of what has been lost, it seems to me, is the possibility of speculating on what might after all transpire, the fantasy of the lost, nurturing, encompassing relationship that could yet be established. Such fantasies are a prominent feature of the adoption literature (cf. Modell 1994: 126; Schwartz 1970; Triseliotis 1973: 5, 35–6, 113–18). Perhaps this is why the searches that reveal death are more traumatic than even the most painful encounters with the living.

Here I make a connection to an inspiration in Gell’s (1992: 206–28) work, the idea of ‘opportunity cost’ and its relevance to representations of time. Gell argues that the value of an event is ‘a function of the feasible substitutes for that event in alternative possible worlds, i.e. alternative “what-if” scenarios’ (1992: 217). One can then see an individual’s progression through life as marked by ever-escalating opportunity costs. In childhood, Gell suggests, the costs of alternative courses of action are rather low: the scope for independent agency is limited, nothing much hinges on taking one course rather than another. But in adulthood and old age, such costs increase as a consequence of the foreclosing of more and more alternative possibilities.

The funnelling-in of the field of ‘open’ possibilities as age advances is inexorable. Open possibilities vanish of their own accord, and transient opportunities must be grasped, costly

though they may be in terms of other opportunities. Age, like childhood, is without opportunities, but differs from childhood in that it is lived out in the shadow of the (by now almost infinite) opportunity costs of actions taken long ago (1992: 219).

The close attention Gell pays to the valuations by which we judge the cost of alternative scenarios, 'the subjective fatefulness of human existence' (1992: 219), and the ever-greater and more certain costs of some action taken long ago, are suggestive in the context of adoption reunions.

When they reflect on the circumstances of their upbringing, adoptees encounter these opportunity costs in the most immediate way. And in their encounters with birth kin, such alternative scenarios are inevitably brought into sharp relief. Indeed, following Gell, one might say that these encounters have the effect of catapulting adoptees into that 'funnelling-in of the field of open possibilities' which is an inevitable consequence of ageing. I was struck by the number of people who, having met a birth mother, told me that they had obviously been much better off with their adoptive parents. But this catapulting effect is particularly stark when birth parents are revealed to have already died. Here, even the possibility of contemplating alternative scenarios is radically foreclosed.<sup>15</sup>

In this way we can grasp some of the significance of the implicit comparisons made by adoptees with an idealized version of the kinship relations of those brought up by birth kin. This dialogue of different narratives of kinship, and alternative scenarios, underlines the inherent incompleteness not just of memory (cf. Lambek 1996: 242), but of the relations (adoptive or birth) which are their subject.

Lambek, writing of possession rituals in Madagascar, which feature the spirits of historic or mythic figures, suggests that in these events the past is brought into the present. The work of memory in possession allows the past to remain unfinished, creatively reworked in the present or, to use his term, 'imperfect' in the grammatical sense (Lambek 1996: 246). When searches for birth kin reveal parents that are already dead, what is foreclosed in the most abrupt way is just that possibility of imagining them into the future, of rearranging the past in a way that can be transmitted from the present to the future. With those who are revealed to be still living, establishing the constraints on current relations also forecloses future possibilities, but such closures retain some uncertainty. Formal exchanges of Christmas cards and the like capture both the limits and the openings to such creative imaginings.

## *Conclusion*

What, then, is revealed about the different kinds of 'time-use' and 'time-talk' (Gell 1998: 15) in the narratives I have discussed? Gell's hypothesis (1992; 1998) that modern Westerners are not just immersed in a calculated, objective sense of time is surely borne out. Those I interviewed readily expressed the importance of their own subjective, uncalculated, time just as they vividly demonstrated the importance of the connections between ritual time and a more practical, everyday accumulation of events in their experience of kinship. When the rituals which mark the special events of kinship become dislocated



from the cumulative practical necessities that kinship commonly carries, these rituals are also emptied of much of their significance.

And here another of Gell's hints has proved fruitful. The suggestion that we can find interesting things to say in the *connections* between these different ways in which time is used or talked about, rather than in merely the distinctions between them, is surely correct. Reunions with birth kin can tell us much about relatedness and about representations of time precisely because they bring into such sharp juxtaposition the calendrical rituals of kinship and the more everyday, less ritualized, work of kinship. The adoption narratives I have described apparently reverse the balance between these modes of representing kinship time in relation to the norm. In the stories I have related, the calculated schedule of rituals is highlighted at the expense of more everyday cumulative events. But what is in fact revealed is the crucial nature of the connections between these different aspects of kinship as they are invoked in time.

Adoption, where it signals the exclusive assumption of parental rights, in the way that it does in the West, necessarily ruptures relations with birth parents, and so sets in train different kinds of time-use and time-talk in respect to kinship. We have seen that those who seek out their birth kin are both asserting their own agency and engaged in constructing continuities of identity which can link together their past, present, and future. In the process, however, they are often faced with the abrupt foreclosing of some future possibilities.

What of the meanings ascribed to biological connection in these stories? We have seen that the search for physical continuities may be part of what motivates adoptees to seek their birth kin, although these similarities become less important after reunions have occurred. We have also seen that biology does not imply endurance, since duration in time necessarily authenticates adoptive kinship and, reversing Schneider's paradigm, is also necessary to authenticate birth relations after reunions. Thus, these reunions expose a fiction at the heart of biological relatedness, that biology encapsulates the relation. Reunions cannot reconstitute the flow of time that is central to the experience of kinship, and so they come to reveal what we always knew, that biology by itself is an insufficient basis for connection (cf. Strathern 1992).<sup>16</sup> And this might be said to complicate not just Schneider's assumptions about the place of sexual procreation at the heart of American kinship, but also its straightforward equation with nature or biology. But perhaps a more nuanced understanding of what is culturally entailed by biology, among other folk assumptions, is a subject for further research.

In contrast to more regular kinship losses through timely death, the discontinuities entailed by adoption can apparently not be handed on, but must be absorbed by those who have borne them. Memories remain discontinuous, fractured, and fragmented; knowledge of kinship is incomplete, as in fact is true for the population at large. At the centre of what is dislodged is that sense of the past and the future in the present that kinship encapsulates. Reunions with birth kin can fill in some of the gaps in a personal biography; they may reveal much about 'where you've come from'. But crucially, they can only partially reconnect the past with the present and the future.

## NOTES

Research was conducted during the tenure of a Nuffield Social Science Research Fellowship. I am grateful to the Nuffield Foundation, to my colleagues in the Department of Social Anthropology at the University of Edinburgh, and to all those I interviewed, for making this work possible. I would particularly like to thank Jennifer Speirs for her help in initiating this work, and the staff of the agency which helped in contacting those I interviewed. I have kept the agency and those I interviewed anonymous, and changed some minor details of biographies to protect the privacy of those concerned. Some of the material used here was presented in a different context at a seminar at the University of Manchester; earlier versions of this article were delivered at the University of St Andrews and at a workshop on 'Kinship and Temporality' held at Goldsmiths College in December 1999. I have benefited greatly from the helpful comments of the audiences on these occasions. I am particularly conscious of my debts to Sophie Day, Maria Phylactou, Jonathan Spencer, and Charles Stafford for their insightful comments on an earlier version of this article. The remaining flaws are my own.

<sup>1</sup>My starting-point – the dichotomy between the 'social' and the 'biological' in American kinship, and the importance of the distinction between the 'fictive' and the 'real' in adoptive relations (cf. Schneider 1980; 1984) – is similar to that of Modell (1994). As I show below, however, time and the completion of biography, submerged themes in Modell's analysis, are no less important to the stories I present here than the social-biological distinction.

<sup>2</sup>See Franklin (1997: 83–5), for a comparable account of fieldwork on assisted reproduction.

<sup>3</sup>My analysis here is limited to the implications of searching for birth kin and attempting reunions. A number of studies show that only a minority of adoptees show an interest in meeting their birth parents (McWhinnie 1969; Raynor 1980; Triseliotis 1973; 1984). It seems likely that the numbers seeking reunions will increase in response to changing attitudes to disclosure of birth records (Sachdev 1989: 16).

<sup>4</sup>See Triseliotis (1973: 133–7), for similar difficulties of establishing relations with birth kin and consequent disappointments of prior expectations. Although Modell's study casts these meetings in a more positive light, it is clear that relations may involve considerable tensions (1994: 188–90).

<sup>5</sup>Similar denials are reported by Modell (1994: 143). Whereas her analysis foregrounds the importance of *work* (1994: 13) rather than time in adoptive kinship, I suggest this is partly a matter of perspective since, in this context, time and effort are mutually constituted.

<sup>6</sup>I am grateful to Mary Bouquet for pointing out the significance of the physical isolation of these objects.

<sup>7</sup>Triseliotis (1973: 120) notes that some of his informants stated that they had no desire to meet birth kin (although they did want to acquire knowledge about them) because they would be strangers. In Modell's (1994: 144) argument, this is simply a reiteration of the central principle on which adoption is based, that birth parents become strangers. I suggest that the assumptions at work are more complex, since assumptions about the indissolubility of birth ties are partly what motivate searches.

<sup>8</sup>There are suggestions that encounters with birth siblings or half-siblings open more positive possibilities for the relations which can be established than those with birth parents.

<sup>9</sup>It is more conventional to speak of bereavement in the context of relinquishing birth mothers (cf. Mander 1995), although Lifton (1979: 41–2) writes of adoptees being deprived of mourning. Triseliotis (1973: 97) suggests that the death of adoptive parents is one circumstance that may trigger a search for birth parents.

<sup>10</sup>One well-known issue in the anthropology of time is Bourdieu's (1963; 1977) contrast between a pragmatic, subjective notion of time which characterizes 'pre-modern' societies such as the Kabyle of Algeria, and an objective, standardized, calculated notion of time which rules the lives of those immersed in the modern world. Gell invites us to see these different attitudes to time not as emblems of an exaggerated contrast between ourselves and others, but as reliant on, and calling forth each other (1998: 19). Likewise, arising from Bloch's (1977) distinction between 'ritual' time and 'practical' everyday time, he suggests that the same activities may draw on both practical notions of time and on a ritual calendar based in religious ideology. Gell's (1992; 1998) attention to the *connections* between different uses of time, and ways of speaking about time, has been especially helpful in developing my argument here.

<sup>11</sup> Similarly, Triseliotis's informants speak of the importance of putting together 'the missing links' (1973: 140), and of being able to connect one's own children's physical appearance to those of one's antecedents. Without such knowledge, one woman suggests that she sees her children as part of her husband's family rather than her own (1973: 152-3).

<sup>12</sup> I find it significant in this context that Modell (1994: 99) mentions the *prospective* desire to be remembered on the part of an adoptive mother, after the death of her own father, as initiating the desire to adopt.

<sup>13</sup> The theme of identity formation and of lacunae in the identity of adoptees is of course prominent in the psychological literature on child development, and on adoption (Sachdev 1989: 12-13; Sorosky, Baran & Pannor 1975).

<sup>14</sup> But note that in her book on the (American) 'adoption experience', based on her own experience and the accounts of others, Lifton begins a chapter entitled 'The adoptee as survivor' with the statement, 'It could be said that all Adoptees are survivors of a holocaust of one kind or another' (1979: 39; see also 272-3). Her book places considerable emphasis on adoptees as victims - of family deceptions (1979: 136), state policies, etc.

<sup>15</sup> See also Triseliotis (1973: 117-18) on the difficulty adoptees may have in accepting such a situation.

<sup>16</sup> Modell, following Schneider more closely than I do here, argues that the fiction of adoption only makes sense in terms of the reference to genealogical relationships. Open adoption dismantles the biological premise on which adoption is constructed, and hence is highly threatening to adoptive parents (1994: 231). While making clear her advocacy of more open relations, she also notes that open adoption 'shows a conservative bent' since it *also* rests on a genealogical premise (1994: 233).

## REFERENCES

- Antze, P. 1996. Telling stories, making selves: memory and identity in Multiple Personality Disorder. In *Tense past: cultural essays in trauma and memory* (eds) P. Antze & M. Lambek, 3-23. London: Routledge.
- & M. Lambek 1996. Introduction: forecasting memory. In *Tense past: cultural essays in trauma and memory* (eds) P. Antze & M. Lambek, xi-xxxviii. London: Routledge.
- Bloch, M. 1977. The past in the present and the past. *Man* (N.S.) 12, 279-92.
- Bourdieu, P. 1963. The attitude of the Algerian peasant towards time. In *Mediterranean countrymen* (ed.) J. Pitt-Rivers, 53-72. Paris: Mouton & Co.
- 1977. *Outline of a theory of practice*. Cambridge: University Press.
- Carsten, J. 1995. The substance of kinship and the heat of the hearth: feeding, personhood and relatedness among Malays of Pulau Langkawi. *American Ethnologist* 22, 223-41.
- 1997. *The heat of the hearth: the process of kinship in a Malay fishing community*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- 2000. Introduction: cultures of relatedness. In *Cultures of relatedness: new approaches to the study of kinship* (ed.) J. Carsten, 1-36. Cambridge: University Press.
- Edwards, J. & M. Strathern 2000. Including our own. In *Cultures of relatedness: new approaches to the study of kinship* (ed.) J. Carsten, 149-66. Cambridge: University Press.
- Frederickson, R. 1992. *Repressed memories: a journey to recovery from sexual abuse*. New York: Fireside/Parkside Books.
- Franklin, S. 1997. *Embodied progress: a cultural account of assisted conception*. London: Routledge.
- Gell, A. 1992. *The anthropology of time*. Oxford: Berg.
- 1998. Time and social anthropology. In *Time, language and cognition* (ed.) Y. Nagano (SENRI Ethnological Studies 45), 9-24. Osaka: National Museum of Ethnology.
- Kirmayer, L.J. 1996. Landscapes of memory: trauma, narrative, and dissociation. In *Tense past: cultural essays in trauma and memory* (eds) P. Antze & M. Lambek, 173-98. London: Routledge.
- Kugelmass, J. 1996. Missions to the past: Poland in contemporary Jewish thought and deed. In *Tense past: cultural essays in trauma and memory* (eds) P. Antze & M. Lambek, 199-214. London: Routledge.
- Kuper, A. 1999. *Culture: the anthropologists' account*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.
- Lambek, M. 1996. The past imperfect: remembering as moral practice. In *Tense past: cultural essays in trauma and memory* (eds) P. Antze & M. Lambek, 235-54. London: Routledge.

- Latour, B. 1993. *We have never been modern*. London: Harvester Wheatsheaf.
- Lifton, B.J. 1979. *Lost and found: the adoption experience*. New York: The Dial Press.
- McWhinnie, A.M. 1969. The adopted child in adolescence. In *Adolescence: psychosocial perspectives* (eds) G. Caplan & S. Lebovici, 133-42. New York: Basic Books.
- Mander, R. 1995. *The care of the mother grieving a baby relinquished in adoption*. Aldershot: Avebury.
- Modell, J. 1994. *Kinship with strangers: adoption and interpretations of kinship in American culture*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Munn, N. 1992. The cultural anthropology of time: a critical essay. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 21, 93-123.
- Raynor, L. 1980. *The adopted child comes of age* (National Institute Social Services Library 28). London: George Allen & Unwin.
- Sachdev, P. 1989. *Unlocking the adoption files*. Lexington, Mass: Lexington Books.
- Schneider, D.M. 1980. *American kinship: a cultural account*. (Second edition). Chicago: University Press.
- 1984. *A critique of the study of kinship*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Schwartz, E.M. 1970. The family romance fantasy in children adopted in infancy. *Child Welfare* 49, 386-91.
- Sorosky, A.D., A. Baran & R. Pannor 1974. Identity conflicts in adoptees. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 45: 1, 18-27.
- Strathern, M. 1992. *After nature: English kinship in the late twentieth century*. Cambridge: University Press.
- Trisliotis, J. 1973. *In search of origins: the experiences of adopted people*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- 1984. Obtaining birth certificates. In *Adoption: essays in social policy, law, and sociology* (ed.) P. Bean, 38-53. New York: Tavistock Publishers.
- Weismantel, M. 1995. Making kin: kinship theory and Zumabagua adoptions. *American Ethnologist* 22, 685-704.
- Weston, K. 1991. *Families we choose: lesbians, gays, kinship*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- 1995. Forever is a long time: romancing the real in gay kinship ideologies. In *Naturalizing power: essays in feminist culturalist analysis* (eds) S. Yanagisako & C. Delaney, 87-110. London: Routledge.

## **‘Savoir d’où l’on vient’: ruptures et continuités du temps et de la parenté dans les récits de réunions d’adoptés avec leurs familles d’origine**

### *Resumé*

Sur la base de recherches effectuées en Écosse, cet article discute les réunions entre des adultes qui ont été adoptés dans leur petite enfance et leurs familles d’origine. Bien que la distinction entre la parenté ‘biologique’ et la parenté ‘sociologique’, qui est centrale à l’analyse anthropologique de la parenté, ait un rapport évident avec les expériences de réunions ainsi qu’avec l’adoption en général, ce point de mire analytique est rendu flou par des questions de temporalité, d’achèvement de biographies et de mémoire, qui motivent et sont soulevées à la fois par ces réunions. Les récits de réunions d’adoptés avec leurs familles d’origine peuvent servir à éclairer les rapprochements entre ces différents thèmes. J’explore leurs implications pour les expériences de la parenté dans la société occidentale en général ainsi que pour l’analyse anthropologique de la parenté.

*Dept of Social Anthropology, University of Edinburgh, Adam Ferguson Building, George Square, Edinburgh EH8 9LL. J.Carsten@ed.ac.uk*